

Israel Makes a Treaty

Exodus 15:22-23:33

The Training Course Begins

The next day, Moses led the still exultant mob eastward into the desert. But for three days they traveled without finding water. They were used to hard work and poor rations, but not this grinding thirst and endless walking in the heat and glare. Moses' formerly awed fans began to grumble. When at last they found water but it proved to be undrinkable, the crowd's mood grew ugly.

In desperation, Moses cried to Yahweh for help. Yahweh showed him a piece of wood and told him that if he threw it into the water, it would become safe to drink. That seemed ridiculous, but no more so than anything else that had happened during the last couple of months. So Moses obeyed, and it worked. While the people were drinking and watering their fainting herds, Yahweh gave Moses another message:

"If you listen carefully to the voice of [Yahweh] your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am [Yahweh], who heals you." (Exodus 15:26)

Trust Me, obey Me, and I will take care of your physical needs. Ignore Me, and you are at the mercy of the climate, the food supply, and of things called germs that you know nothing about. Yahweh must have felt like the parent of two million two-year-olds, with only one eighty-year-old nurse to commiserate with.

What Is It?

The travelers recouped at a large oasis beyond which lay the foreboding Desert of Sin. Two weeks had passed since the Reed Sea, and the people were getting tired of hiking. The kids were crying, everybody had sore feet, and there was little to drink and less to eat. They were forgetting how bad it had been to make bricks for the Egyptians; all they could remember were the stews they had cooked. A riot was brewing. Once again, Moses and Aaron faced the rabble and said, "You're not grumbling against us, but against Yahweh." They pointed toward the huge glowing cloud hovering near the camp.

Patiently, Yahweh appealed to His squalling toddlers on their level. At twilight a vast flock of quail flew in, and the people feasted. In the morning, dew lay on everything. When the dew burned off, thin flakes like frost covered the desert floor. Manna? people asked each other. What is it?

"It is the bread Yahweh has given you to eat," Moses explained. "Everyone is to gather as much as he or she needs, about two quarts for each person in your tent. No one is to keep any until morning."

The people did as they were told. The stuff was white and tasted like wafers made with honey. Not too bad. They called it "what-is-it?"

Slaves into Servants

This whole desert journey was the beginning of a school. Yahweh had trained Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons as individuals; now He had to put more than a million people through the same course. Some of them weren't even Jacob's descendants and had only heard of Yahweh a few months earlier. Nearly all of them had grown up as slaves and children of slaves.

This stage in Yahweh's plan was about transformation. First,

Yahweh had multiplied Israel from a clan of seventy to a mob of some two million people. But they were an unruly rabble, and Yahweh intended to make them a tight-knit, disciplined army and a united nation who saw themselves as family. At the same time, He was moving them geographically from Egypt to Canaan. And third, He was going to transform them socially and spiritually from slaves of men into servants of God.

To change from slaves into servants, the people had to learn to fear — and at the same time trust — Yahweh more than any other god or human. One might expect that the plagues, the Reed Sea miracle, and the constant physical presence of the cloud would have convinced them, but dry mouths and growling stomachs proved otherwise. Hence, Yahweh deprived them of the sources of their basic necessities to force them to depend on Him. Then each day He provided just what they needed, so as to reinforce an attitude of daily dependence. They were going to need this attitude sorely when they reached Canaan and ceased to get so many dramatic physical signs of Yahweh's presence and power.

At this point, they still fell far short. As soon as water ran scarce, the mob was ready to riot. "Is Yahweh really among us or not?" they demanded. Moses panicked, but Yahweh continually came through. *I am really the God who is there.*

The next test of faith for the Israelites came when some desert tribesmen called Amalekites attacked. They normally occupied the southern approach to Canaan, but having heard that a horde was approaching their territory, they sent a contingent to cut them off.

Now the Israelites had left Egypt armed for battle, but so far they hadn't had to fight. Moses instructed his young aide, Joshua, to array the troops. Moses himself stood on a hill overlooking the field and prayed to Yahweh all day while the armies clashed. In the end, Israel was victorious and saw yet another side of Yahweh: He was their Deliverer, their Healer, their Provider, and now their War Standard. And Yahweh declared that there would be a permanent feud between Israel and Amalek. Why? Because just as He saw the Serpent behind the throne of Egypt, so He knew His ancient Enemy was in this attempt to crush Israel before it could be fully born.

Covenant

So far, freedom seemed to spell nothing but deprivation. For while Yahweh cared about His people's empty stomachs, He was more concerned about their empty hearts. So day passed into weary day as the cavalcade followed the golden cloud through the desert.

Exactly three months from the day they left Egypt, the Israelites came to a mountain jutting 2,200 feet above the desert floor. Moses ordered them to camp, then climbed a short way alone to receive Yahweh's instructions. Yahweh told him to tell the people,

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:4-6)

Moses took this message back to the elders of Israel—the heads of each clan in each tribe—and they recognized what Yahweh was offering. He was using the form of a treaty between a sovereign and a vassal (dependent) people that was used throughout the Near East. Yahweh claimed to be the rightful King over all the nations of the world, even though they were in rebellion against Him. So, if Israel would commit to recognizing Yahweh as King, He would give them an honored place as the first nation in His eventual world kingdom. They would be His priests in that they would mediate between Him and the rest of the earth's peoples.

Two key words in this treaty proposal are *obey* and *holy*. *Holy* means "set apart from the commonplace." Ancient Near Eastern peoples recognized two categories of things. On one side of a chasm were common things, including humans and animals. On the other were holy beings and everything that belonged to them. As priests, the Israelites would be wholly set apart from pursuing their own ends, wholly dedicated to Yahweh's agenda.

Most ancient people thought of the holy in terms of power

and inscrutability. All the divine beings were holy, from the least tree spirit to the father of the gods. Holiness did not imply morality or love at all. But Yahweh's holiness was drastically different. Since holiness was one of His chief qualities and would have to be a primary trait of His people, one of His tasks in training Israel would be to change the nation's idea of holiness. First, He had to get across that only He was holy, not the gods and spirits of the pagans. Second, what belonged to Him was untouchably, radically holy and its separation had to be taken seriously. Third, because morality was an essential trait of Yahweh, it was an essential trait of His holiness. Anyone who violated moral rules was therefore unholy and could not approach the Holy God. Such a violator was "unrighteous" — out of right covenant relationship with the King because of lawbreaking. Everyone set apart for Yahweh had to be righteous or face His wrath.

The elders of Israel did not yet grasp the implications of what they were getting into, so they readily agreed to make a treaty with Yahweh. They began to get an inkling when Moses ordered them to wash and abstain from sex for three days as outward signs of inward purification and separation from earthly activities. They got nervous when Moses told them to bar the people from touching the mountain, lest they die. Then on the third day the mountain began to quake, smoke and fire poured forth, thunder crashed, lightning flashed, and a loud trumpet blared out of nowhere. Suddenly it did not seem so appealing to be the priests who could be familiar with this holy God; the people were content to let Moses receive Yahweh's instructions and bring them back.

The Ten Commandments

So Moses climbed into the smoke and returned a short time later with a pronouncement that followed the treaty form of the day. First the Great King identified Himself and described the gracious deeds He had done for His subjects: "I am [Yahweh] your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). Israel had done nothing to earn this relationship. On the contrary, by liberating Israel, Yahweh should have earned the people's gratitude and loyalty.

Israel was supposed to express that gratitude by keeping the ten basic treaty stipulations that followed. The first four dealt with how the people would relate to Yahweh:

- ◆ You shall have no other gods before Me.
- ◆ You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- ◆ You shall not misuse the name of Yahweh.
- ◆ Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

A subject could have only one king, and a wife but one husband. Yahweh wanted this relationship to have the intimacy of a marriage. He was dealing with Middle Eastern peasants, former slaves, some of whom had grown up worshiping the forces of nature depicted as beings in wood and stone. His goal was to draw them each into personal companionship with Him, but they weren't ready for that yet. He was bringing them as fast and as far as they could come.

The first step was to wean them from worshiping natural forces and demons. The next was to convince them not to make idols, neither of Him nor anything else. Human thinking is so concrete; we're not comfortable unless we can have a thing we can see and touch to adore. And we are so impressed with the energies of the earth. Above all, we long for control over our world. So Yahweh said, I—the Creator of the earth and all its powers—am the only one worthy of worship. Do not bow to anything else, material or spiritual. Don't confuse the Maker with the made. Don't use My name in magic or casual swearing, as though you could use Me to get what you want. Don't say, "God told me" when I didn't. And one day out of your week must be devoted to resting and enjoying Me, so that making a living won't shrivel your spirits and make you deaf to divinity.

Yahweh's last six commands described how His subjects should relate to each other. These were intended to safeguard individuals and communities so that everyone could prosper. For instance, He told them to prize, respect, and care for their parents. He knew how quickly a society would fragment when children harbored resentment against their parents and denied

them care in their old age. Bitterness against parents would shackle a person to forever seeking approval or revenge in relationships. And the person who ignored elderly parents would one day find his or her own children doing the same. To honor and forgive parents—even those who had failed—was a key to inner freedom.

Similarly, in forbidding murder, Yahweh wanted to instill a value for life. No culture could long survive if its people accepted the blithe killing of unwanted children, the aged and infirm, unloved wives, and personal enemies. Yahweh banned adultery in order to protect lifelong commitments between husband and wife. He knew how adultery destroyed everyone involved, leaving spouse and children feeling abandoned, and numbing the adulterer's ability to commit the deep levels of his or her heart to anyone.

Yahweh forbade theft to protect property rights, but he also prohibited coveting other people's property. Like not forgiving and being unfaithful, coveting was a cancer in the heart, robbing a person of joy and contentment, poisoning relationships. Yahweh cared not just about His people's outward behavior, but also about their inner health and character.

In addition, Yahweh banned lying, especially in court. Legal corruption, He knew, would rot the nation. Truth had to be a fundamental value.

The King's Law

After these ten basic commandments, Yahweh gave an assortment of examples of how they would apply in the daily life of peasant farmers. He elaborated on property rights and on how to show the value of a human life in the way one treated one's servants. He discussed penalties for violent crime and extolled generosity to the poor. He said a bit about how to worship Him and explicitly forbade consorting with other spirits for power. More legislation would come later; this was just enough to show His subjects what He was getting at.

In short, Yahweh was setting Himself up as the King and sole Lawmaker of the nation. This was unheard of in the ancient world. No other nation's law code claimed that a god gave it or

was its authority for justice. Babylonian and Assyrian law codes recorded what some judges had done in the past, but judges were free to decide by their own opinion. Kings made and unmade laws and in many states they decided justice according to their whims, not permanent laws. Egypt's pharaoh was considered a god on earth, so his every decree supposedly embodied truth and justice, whether or not people were treated justly, alike, or in proportion to their deeds. Thus, there was no Egyptian law code at all.

But in Israel neither Moses, nor the elders, nor judges, nor even later kings would have the right to make laws. They could administer and execute laws, collect taxes, keep the peace, and make judicial rulings, but Yahweh was the legislative branch of the government.

We might fear this would lead to chaos, but in fact Israel had the most fair and humane laws of its day. Many of the legal principles Yahweh laid down underlie the codes of modern nations. For instance, when Yahweh gave sample cases, He repeatedly gave motives or reasons for the just decisions to show the logic or moral value behind the decree. Justice was to be reasonable and compassionate, not arbitrary. Again, Israel's law commanded the death penalty for crimes against God and against the holiness of life, but it was strikingly humane compared to other codes. Only Deuteronomy 25:11-12 mentions bodily mutilation, in contrast to many places in Babylonian, Hittite, and other codes. Flogging was limited to forty lashes in Israel.

Other codes treated commoners' lives as less valuable than noblemen's. They regarded harm done to a woman, a slave, or an ox all as harm to a man's property. For instance, if a nobleman caused the death of a noblewoman, the Babylonian code of Hammurabi said that the killer's *daughter* had to die. If a nobleman caused a slavewoman's death, he paid a sum of silver to her owner. By contrast, Israel's law protected women and slaves explicitly from being used as property, and made justice the same for all social classes. Physical discipline of slaves was limited, though not forbidden, and killing a slave was punished the same way as killing a freeman.

"An eye for an eye" is a well-known principle from Israel's

law code. Many people suppose it was a harsh, vengeful standard, but in fact Yahweh was limiting the sternness of tribal justice. Ancient tribal custom demanded that if a man killed someone in your tribe, you killed at least him, if not his whole family. If he injured you, your family tried to kill him. But Yahweh said no, a punishment must not exceed the crime. It must also not be too lenient, as in many countries where noblemen received preference. In practice, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" was a figure of speech. If a man blinded his slave's eye, he did not lose his own eye, but he did have to free the slave (Exodus 21:23-27). Property damage, personal injury, and accidental killing were covered by fines, not retaliation. Only with premeditated murder did "eye for eye" apply literally because Yahweh took human life extremely seriously.

Social justice was one of Yahweh's passions. Yahweh warned judges not to show favoritism to either rich or poor, nor to let a crowd's opinion sway a decision. He forbade bribes. He warned His people not to oppress foreigners who would come to live in Israel: "You yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). He even banned the lending of money at interest to fellow Israelites. People didn't borrow money to set up businesses or buy houses in those days; they borrowed only when they were broke. Yahweh wanted His subjects to treat each other like family, lending without interest out of love. He repeatedly warned that if poor or defenseless people cried to Him for help against the rich and powerful, He would avenge them.

Indeed, when Moses said, "What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:8), he was telling the truth.